

More avant garde

One of the first acts in cultural analysis is setting up the terms of what will be studied. This is inevitably an inductive/deductive process in which the researcher starts with a broad intuitive sense of what needs to be defined and then tries to set up terms, boundaries, limits so that the work can move forward. But in the process, boundaries may change and definitions may need to be changed. The very definition of the field shapes what kinds of questions can be raised. The downside is that the work being done can simply be circular, and finally banal. The upside is that new ideas may come forward, and thus genuinely new knowledge can be generated.

Avant garde
Experimental
Underground
New American Cinema
Independent
Sundance

My specific concern is the field of experimental film and video. What do we mean by “experimental”? That varies a bit with different historians and critics and artists having slightly different views,

When I first arrived at the Radio/Television/Film department at Northwestern, there was a common operating definition that films could be divided into dramatic narratives, documentaries, and experimental.

Fred camper definition

New York’s Cinema 16, founded in the postwar era as a showcase and forum for independent film, organized in 1953 a symposium on “Poetry and the Film” that offered the first real public debate on the theory behind what was then considered experimental film. significantly, the first record of the avant garde film project is an aesthetic statement which addresses itself to political concerns largely in terms of stating its antagonistic relation to the Hollywood money men. The symposium centered on Maya Deren’s presentation of the “horizontal” (i.e., dramatic, narrative) elements of cinema in relation to its “vertical” (i.e., poetic, nonnarrative) potential, using as an explanatory example the value of the soliloquies in Shakespeare’s plays, prized for their poetry although they often seem tangential to the plays’ dramatic development or conclusion. Deren was a notable figure in the avant garde at this time, not only for

her films, but for her ceaseless prosthetizing. determined to close the gap between the avant garde filmmaker and the public, and taking audience ignorance as cause for communication, not condemnation, she continually explicated her work and aims. similarly democratic impulses inspired Jonas Mekas and Vogel to build an institutional base for independent filmmaking: distribution and exhibition (Vogel's Cinema 16) and criticism (Mekas' Film culture). This base helped to break down the isolation of the individual artist, to validate a cultural alternative to the dominant commercial cinema, to foster the imagining of other possibilities, and to provide the communication and resources that would allow a new cinema to come into being. Both Mekas and Vogel were eclectic in their taste and generous in their support. Vogel held to the position that, "in the last analysis, every work of art, to the extent that it is original and breaks with the past instead of repeating it, is subversive."¹ The implicit limits of this position were pointed out later by critic Parker Tyler (also a symposium participant). Tracing the relationship of Beat culture to the anti-establishment thinking of underground filmmakers, his 1969 comment has the clarity of hindsight: Curiously enough, the Underground Film movement,...can be identified as having traits of both Anarchist and Communist philosophy. The catch is that...the movement has taken specifically formal virtues as the object of destruction, and has done so not autocratically, by rigidly excluding those virtues, but by using its universal-tolerance code.²

The development of this universal tolerance code could be seen in 1960 when a different meeting took place. The convening of the New American Cinema group, an uneasy alliance of the political and the poetic, produced a founding statement with anti-capitalist tendencies. The 25 member group called for new methods of financing independent films, praised personal expression, condemned censorship, placed itself in opposition to the current distribution-exhibition policies which it thought high time to "blow up." And mandated Emile de Antonio to set up a distribution cooperative. A new stage had been reached in the New American Cinema. The eclectic spirit succeeded in opening up the ranks of the avant garde to a broad range of cinematic strategies, as the first four Film Culture annual awards confirm. they were given to low-budget fictional narration (*Shadows*, d. John Cassavetes) in 1959, to the wacky off-Beat *Pull My Daisy* (Alfred Leslie and Robert Frank) in 1960, the cinema-verite approach of *Primary* (Richard Leacock, Donn Pennebaker, Robert Drew, and Albert Maysles) in 1961, and the poetic cinema of Stan Brakhage's *The Dead* and *Prelude* in 1962. The parameters of the New American Cinema had expanded, both politically and aesthetically, but had done so very much along its earlier lines of definition: against the domination of the film industry, they stood for artisan production.

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Attitudes suited to Eisenhower's Cold War were slightly updated to the optimistic liberalism of the Kennedy years.

The positions assumed by Jonas Mekas during this period provide a representative index of the times. In the 50's Mekas had continued the politics of the heart which he used in the Resistance against Nazi occupation of his native Lithuania during World War 2. His early New York diary films chronicle his pacifist participation in Ban the Bomb demonstrations. By 1964 he had made *The brig*, a documentary style filming of the Living theatre's production of Kenneth Brown's play about military brutality. there was always a strong current of romanticism motivating such anti-establishment politics (in the US a line stretching from Henry David Thoreau to Timothy Leary). for Mekas, as for many artists, this tendency easily metamorphosed into a creed of cultivating one's own garden, an individualism implicit all along in the Age of Aquarius. Indeed, by 1966 Mekas could write,

We used to march with posters protesting this and protesting that. Today, we realize that to improve the world, the others, first we have to improve ourselves; that only through the beauty of our own selves can we beautify the others.³

(ref also John Lennon

This evolution along the lines of individualistic tolerance can also be traced in terms of Mekas' position on homosexuality. In 1955 Mekas wrote a controversial essay on US experimental film (since repudiated by the author) that centered its attack on the "adolescent character" of the films and the "conspiracy of homosexuality" among their makers. In retrospect, Mekas was rather on-target in his assessment of those films' heroes: "ouch with reality seems to be very feeble. Instead of a human being, we find a poetic version of a modern zombie."⁴ Mekas faulted these films' symbolist/surrealist unreality, the characters' Dostoevskian inner absorption, the entire work's distance from the concrete world in which people live. In other words, Mekas criticized one dominant tradition of the romantic artist, in this instance ethereal, idealist truth-seeking. He furthermore faulted the work for its homosexual "perversion" and "unmotivated" art of "abnormality."

Nine years later, however, he switched sides, opting for the journey not to the heights, but into the depths, praising such films as Ken Jacobs' and bob Fleischer's *Blond Cobra* and Ron Rice's *The Flower Thief*. Mekas claimed that these films, and others of their genre, raised the supreme challenge to ossified bourgeois culture and morality via their homosexual

subject matter and/or deliberately crude style. He brought Jack Smith's *Flaming Creatures*, a classic of polymorphous eroticism, to the Knokke-Heist experimental film festival in 1963, where he championed its beauty against the censorship of Belgian officials (although he referred disparagingly to "the fags who were swamping the fest" and bothering his friend Paul Adams Sitney).⁵ Mekas held apparently opposing views in fragile equilibrium, bound together only by the notion of the artist standing above society with his vision as a challenge to it.

The early gay films of the 50s and 60s, both disparaged and praised by Mekas, can be seen in another light. In the dark years between the McCarthy-style derailment of the first US lesbian and gay movement and its renaissance after Stonewall in 1969, these films, together with their literary analogue, the Beat movement, constituted the only visible glimmer of the pervasive gay subculture testified to by Kinsey, and the only hints of the movement that was to follow in the 70s. This visibility alone was a kind of militancy in the context of the period. Likewise, the commitment of Amos Vogel and others (*Grove Press*, Lenny Bruce, *Evergreen Review*, even *Playboy*) to the breaking of sexual taboos was progressive within the struggle against Puritanism, censorship, and threats to free speech. It was a period of contradictions, with court cases and jailings, the birth control pill and sexual liberation. In Chicago, for example, the center Cinema Co-op grew out of the Aardvark Theater, which showed a mix of experimental films and commercial porn. The limitations of such a politics became more apparent once its victories of free expression were won, and the emergence of the women's movement proved how different (and overlapping) sexual liberation and women's liberation were. Though many filmmakers and their supporters held up the breaking of sexual taboos as an artistic banner throughout the 60s, the fervor for the forbidden, once one, abated, leaving behind the artistic romanticism that always rested at its foundation.

On the West Coast, meanwhile, a more Rousseauvian romanticism was flourishing. James Broughton celebrated sexual innocence in films of lyric love in the 50s and more explicit eroticism in the 60s. With San Francisco as the center of the booming counter-culture, independent filmmaking turned psychedelic, while the freedom of the drug vision was expressed increasingly as a loosening of sexual restraints. Consider this typical description from the 1967 Canyon cinema catalogue: "The Psychedelics: abstractions of reality using psychedelic patterns projected onto nude female bodies." Not all California filmmaking was psychedelic. There was also an attention to social satire, particularly in the work of Bruce Conner and Robert Nelson. Conner assembled found footage into dark comedies of society viewed askew, as in *Report*, which exposed the Kennedy assassination as a media event. In 1965, Nelson's o

dem watermelons (a counter-culture remake of entr'acte) accompanied the San Francisco Mime Troupe on its pro-civil rights tour of the country, making it probably one of the most politically effective experimental films of the time. It was a limited political. Screenings today require an explanation of how its whacky slapstick against watermelons actually could symbolize American racism.

Some avant garde filmmakers were able to make effective political films in the mid-60s by functioning as chroniclers, in their own style, of political events: for example, Bruce Baillie's Port Chicago Vigil (1966), a diary film of a demonstration against the shipping of napalm to Vietnam. Or in 1967, in New York, the Week of Angry Arts got a number of artists and galleries to hold a sort of moratorium in which artists dedicated work to the anti-war effort (though the individual work was not necessarily overtly political). Some 60 filmmakers participated in shooting one to three minute films for the occasion, resulting in a mammoth 3 hour compilation film, For Life, Against the War, with contributions by artists such as mekas, Stan Rakhage, Ken Jacobs, Robert Breer, and Shirley Clarke. The majority of work produced during this period was anti-establishment, in film as in the other arts, though there was an already growing rift between the avant garde and left-political camps.

During the late 50s and early 60s, film culture included overt political discussions as a regular part of its film coverage, just as the new American cinema movement included a number of political numbers in its membership. While the avant garde and political people shared a common enemy, they shared no common perspective or strategy. Relations became strained during the 60s as the political filmmakers saw art as instrumental--using films to raise money, provide resources for organized social and political organizations, or as they objected to the personalities of the dominant avant garde figures. The split widened rapidly at the end of the decade.

IN THE STREETS/IN THE GALLERIES

Add somewhere--WWBM

New developments were brewing that would leave underground film in a centrist position. On the one hand the increase of anti-war activity, the student movement, and the emergence of a militant Black Power movement would lead to a new engaged cinema, and on the other hand

the experiential cinema moved closer to the modernist visual arts for its models, leading to a new “structural” cinema.

In 1967 the Pentagon demonstration marked the end of nonviolence as the leading tactic in the anti-war movement and brought together a new group of committed documentarists, who then formed Newsreel, the NEW LIFE filmmaking and distribution-exhibition group that flourished in New York and other cities for several years.⁶ Seeing themselves basically in an agitational and informational role, they were open to and influenced by fresh strategies such as the work of Cuba's Aníbal Alvarez. As with Alvarez and many other Third World radical filmmakers, the combination of limited resources, political enthusiasm, desire to communicate about topical issues, and eager audiences lead to films still notable for their vigor, immediacy, and fresh vision. In addition, a heavily Yippie influence⁷ in the early months of Newsreel made it open to a wide variety of artistic experimentation--an impulse reinforced by the accomplished editing style of Allan Siegel. It was a time when almost every news report mentioned new fighting in Vietnam, and new resistance at home--ghetto rebellions, farm worker's unionizing, draft resistance, student activism, and many other expressions of change. It was a time when rock music appeared progressive by its very nature, and the counter-culture seemed to make everyone under 30 years old political by definition.

As Newsreel responded to events “in the streets,” the avant garde responded to events “in the galleries.” Annwet Michelson set the terms of this new position in “film and the radical ‘Aspiration’” (1966) which began essentially:

The history of Cinema is, like that of Revolution in our time, a chronicle of hopes and expectations, aroused and suspended, tested and deceived.⁸

Michelson consistently perceived radical formalism as the only possible political and aesthetic stance for filmmakers. Indeed, in summing up the status quo later in the article, she wrote:

In a country whose power and affluence are maintained by the dialectic of a war economy, in a country whose dream of revolution has been sublimated in reformism, and frustrated by an equivocal prosperity, cinematic radicalism is condemned to an politics and strategy of social and aesthetic subversion.⁹

⁶ Nichols

⁷ define yippie

⁸ Michelson

Thus independent film turns from the material process of life to the materiality of cinema, films investigation of its own filmic properties (grain, strobe effect, focus, etc.). Andy Warhol--a successful Pop ART painter and celebrity turned filmmaker--marked a turning point when he received the 1964 Film Culture award for his minimalist films *Sleep*, *Kiss*, *Eat*, *Haricot*, and *Empire*. While Warhol's early work parallels the filmic tradition of breaking taboos, his recognition by Film Culture is for a new phase of his work which can be seen to usher in a new style of filmmaking derived less from Pop and mass art and more from the minimalist phase beginning to be heralded by critics and avant-garde galleries. The post-modernist canons of the art world at this time (with emphasis on process art, minimalism, performance, and conceptual art) exercise a powerful influence on this generation of filmmakers: for example, Tony Conrad, *The Flicker*, 1966, Michael Snow, *Wavelength*, 1967, Ken Jacobs, *Tom, Tom*, *The Pioneer's Son*, 1969.

The Seventies Orthodoxy

In 1970 Gene Youngblood's book, *Expanded Cinema*, promised an Aquarian democratization of the media, expanding from the West Coast to topple the exclusive media hierarchies nationwide not with just new forms, but whole new technologies: video, computers, generational systems, lasers and other exotic hardware. As it turned out, the promise wasn't kept.

Once again New York City is the cultural point of origin (as it had been for film in the Beat era and with the publication of P. Adams Sitney's "Structural Film" essay (1969) its structural filmmakers became the new orthodoxy, serviced by a new cultural establishment.

The consolidation of the decade began with the opening, in 1970, of the Anthology Film Archives, founded by five men (including Meks and Sitney), funded by their friend Jerome Hill, and structured to accommodate only the work of their own taste--even to the extent of the famous "invisible cinema," which made only a certain kind of film look good.¹⁰ They developed critical power: Meks continued his persuasive *Village Voice* columns, he and Sitney continued to publish *Film Culture*, and Michelson was by now the film and performance editor of *Artforum*, the leading publication on new art, as well as editor of film books for Praeger, a major intellectual press. Both Michelson and Sitney were teaching at New York University, where in their classes the Anthology collection was the standard of excellence. Sitney's *Visionary Film* (1974) remains the most scholarly and therefore most influential book on avant-garde cinema. Its concluding chapter, while more critical towards its subject than the historical chapters, effectively canonized its ultimate

hierarchy of Snow, Sharits, Landow, Frampton, and Gehr. NYU trained students further immortalized the same hierarchy in their critical essays commissioned for the Whitney Museum's History of the American 'Avant-grade Cinema' catalogue, which was attacked upon its publication in 1976 by Vogel and others precisely for replicating this same narrow range.